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Seminar: Cultural Geography

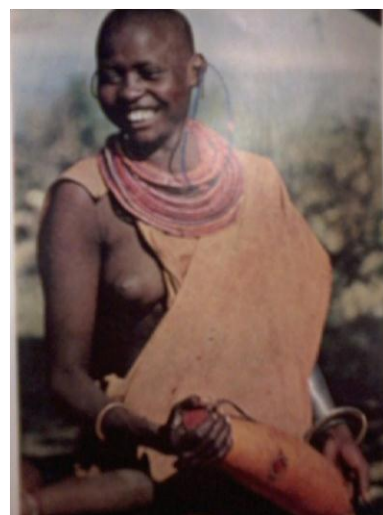
National Geographic Comparison

11-26-2011

## **Africa as Represented in National Geographic from 1965-1980**

### **Part 1. Adventure**

In the time frame of 1965-1980, National Geographic Magazine covered countries located on the continent of Africa in a few standardized formats. The first format is what I would consider the “Adventure” appeal. Several articles were written that actually included the words “Adventure” in the title. For example, ‘*Ethiopian Adventure*’, which actually presents the country of Ethiopia as an untouched wild frontier, filled with natives, and devoid of western infrastructure. The appeal is standard in the sense that it attracts the desire of the European and American culture to experience the fantastic, untouched primitive civilizations of a foreign continent much like the explorers of past generations.



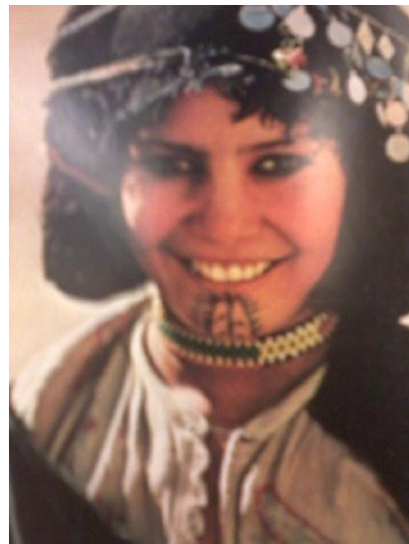
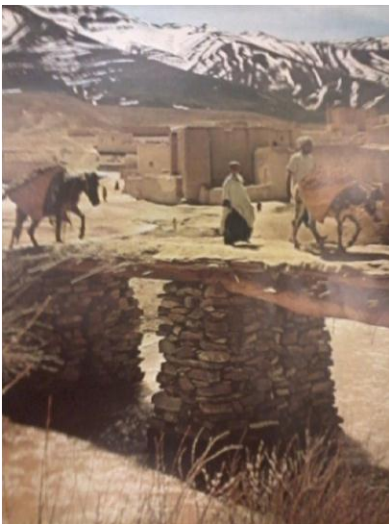
The reader is then mesmerized with some of the highest quality photography to ever grace the surface of paper. Africa is presented in these articles as the last chance to experience the thrill of walking amongst a civilization that will soon disappear into the modern world of urbanized development. As if this culture is yet to be explored by western eyes. An uncommon display of savages living within a world that clings to its primitive existence thriving off of the land with substance farming, nomadic lifestyles, and connection with the earth that has been long lost in the world of combustion engines, electricity, and clothing (specifically the shirts of women).

Another article, *Yankee* cruises the storied Nile (May 1965), glamorized the act of sailing (which is obviously a wealthier activity). The appeal of an article such as this, panders to an almost “jet-set” demographic, one that seeks adventure on foreign soil. The theme of sailing was also championed in *World Roaming Teen-ager Sails On* (April 1969), and in *The Voyage of Ra II* (January 1971). The only other appeal would be to those who desire to live vicariously through the adventures of the ruling class. The usage of the *YANKEE* as a guide for National Geographic articles is a format that has been used to guide the reader through several foreign adventures. For example, The *YANKEE* also sailed the Danube in 1967.



Another article that focuses on “adventure” as a theme is *Trek by Mule Among Morocco's Berbers* (Nov 1967). Although, Morocco is probably not considered Africa by

contemporary standards or generalizations, it still resides on the continent of Africa. The Non-African classification would be widely accepted because Morocco bears more resemblance to a Moorish or Arab influenced Spanish region. The article gives a unique view into the culture and landscape of Morocco from the traditional pathways of travel by equine. Again, the article plants the seed of foreign adventure to those seeking thrills by horseback, trekking through Moroccan hills and valleys. Of course, the lure of the uniquely beautiful Moroccan women is visually represented and most likely appeals to the same demographic that would seek adventure.



## Part2. Exoticism

A strong emphasis is placed upon pictorially capturing the rituals and beautification practices of specific tribes. This concept is a crossover theme that resides in both the adventure aspect and the visual appeal of selling exoticism and can be specifically seen in both sections as a pictorial display of tattooed chinned young women are featured in *Trek by Mule Among Morocco's Berbers* and as women repeatedly appear topless throughout numerous volumes. One

article, *Proud Primitives: The Nuba People* (1966) focuses upon the traditional female



beautification practice of an elaborated

scarification process that women endure.

Another continuous theme that permeates

these articles is the constant visual

depiction of people (specifically women)

carrying things upon their heads.



When the bizarre acts of body modifications lose their shock value, the National Geographic photographers promptly move on to depictions of subsistence farming and sparse existence that drastically (and exotically) differs from the Western norms of its target audience. This can be seen in the article *The Danakil: Nomads of Ethiopia's Wasteland* (February 1970), in which a tribe of nomadic people live in a desolate environment and carve out a living directly from the earth by harvesting large chunks of salt from the salt plains. The Danakil are also depicted as an “armed and ready to defend” culture that brandish assault weapons in a militant fashion. This group is adamant about protecting its salt harvesting resources. Their culture is unique in the fact that the people do not have permanent housing or industrially constructed tools

for extracting salt, but do possess well-constructed assault rifles and the commercially produced ammunition to use them as a means for resource defense.



*-Danakil Men extracting salt with sticks, and with assault rifles*

The concept of exoticism would not be complete without at least a brief mention of the unique wildlife that National Geographic focuses on in entire articles. Specifically, the articles: *Adventures with South Africa's Black Eagles* (October 1969), *Tool Using Bird-Egyptian Vulture* (May 1968), *In Quest of the World's Largest Frog* (July 1967), *Making Friends with Mountain Gorillas* (January 1970), and *East Africa's Majestic Flamingos* (February 1970). The continued mention throughout the years of animals unique to the African landscape further perpetuates the representation of a wild untamed land full of never before seen exotic characteristics. The usage of wildlife to sell the whole package of exoticism works sort of like the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae, the animals serve as a subtle reminder that not only is the people, culture, and landscape



diametrically opposed to what the western mindset is used to seeing, but Africa's uniqueness permeates throughout every crevice down to its smallest creatures.

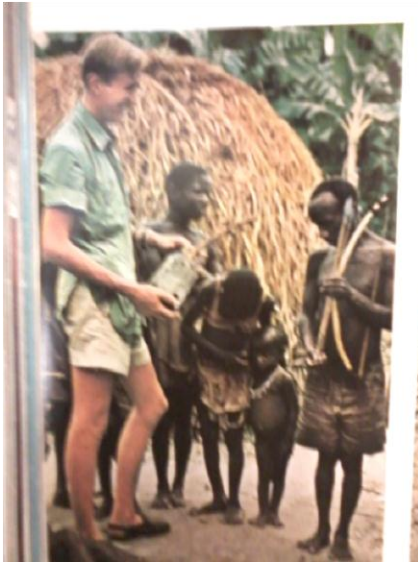


*-An Egyptian Vulture using stone tools (left) and a Black Eagle dive bombing*

### **Part 3. Anthropology**

National Geographic's role in presenting Africa to the developed world would not be complete without a mention of its role in the introducing the world to the legendary Leakey family in *The Leakeys of Africa: A Family in Search of Prehistoric Man* (February 1965) and Jane Goodall in *New Discoveries Among African Chimps* (December 1965). These two articles and a few well-placed television shows single handedly made Jane Goodall and the Leakey Family household names. Louis Leakey was the son of a British missionary whose interest veered away from the family profession and toward the origins of man. He and his wife, raised their family amongst African natives while searching for prehistoric fragments of humans and animals. The Leakeys later paired up with Jane Goodall's efforts to study chimpanzees in the

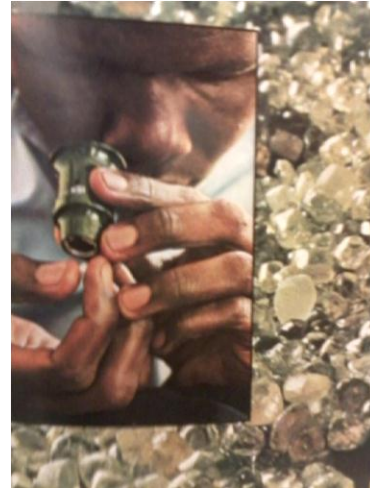
same region. Both of British origin and rapidly becoming popular household names forged an anthropological union that is fundamentally recognized as Anthropological royalty in the realm of academia.



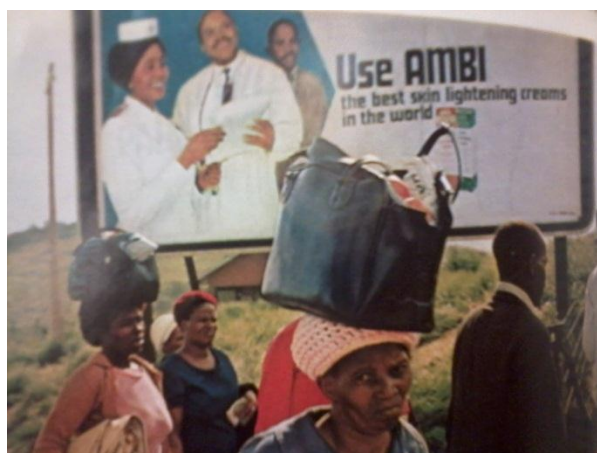
-A young Leakey (left) and Jane Goodall with a chimp (right)

#### Part 4. Clashing of Cultures

One of the most persistent themes throughout National Geographic's depiction of Africa from 1965-1980 is the concept of a changing world and the clashing of cultures that accompany the phenomenon. In *Freedom speaks French in Ouagadougou* (1966), a region in which the French have utilized for the mining of diamonds, the clashing of cultures is apparent as the pictures dictate a region that remains traditional in structure but is slowly adopting a French influence as the diamond business flourishes. This can be seen as a man dons traditional facial scars while wearing a French uniform.



Another example of clashing cultures is evident in *The Zulu's: Black nation in a Land of Apartheid* (November 1971). The Zulu nation exists inside of South Africa, they are a strong and abundant ethnic minority in a country colonized and controlled by a European presence. The Zulu's reside in the south eastern corner of South Africa. The pictures depict the dominant culture (European) as evident as product placement in advertisements on billboards and social structure in the workplace. In the picture below, a woman carries her European style handbag on her head in the traditional manner. Meanwhile, an advertisement for a skin lightening cream looms in the background as the ever evident dominant culture shouts its moral values and idea of beauty into the lives of a minority population.





*-In the picture below, a “white overseer” stands while a workforce comprised of Zulu’s work hard labor on the railroad.*



One main reason that images like this were most likely chosen is because in America the civil rights movement was ripe and on the minds of readers throughout National Geographic's target audience. As a means to show racial inequalities to the target audience it is often easier to show something not familiar to get the point across. In a way, the American audience couldn't see the forest for the trees when it came to recognizing its own racial problems, and presenting the inequalities prevalent within a society built upon Apartheid could allow greater perspective. This usage of an exotic culture can be greatly commended as a tool of liberation in America, regardless of the fact that the American culture of racial inequality in the 1960's was more reflective of Apartheid than a diametrically opposed example traditionally explored by National Geographic.

In Conclusion, The basic themes clustered in the years of 1965-1980 National Geographic's depiction of Africa are as follows: The lure of adventure, the mesmerizing glimpse into the exotic, the role of clashing cultures as the developed world moves into a infrastructural

barren continent, and the presence of Anthropological ventures that allude to the mysteries of existence that could only be uncovered in the place where mankind saw its origins.